

## REFERENCE LETTER

by

**Prof. Rosemary Statelova, PhD in Arts Studies**

**concerning**

**Asst. Prof. Ventsislav Dimov Dimov, DSc,**

**candidate for acquiring the academic rank of**

**PROFESSOR**

**in the professional division 3.5. Social Communications**

**and Information Sciences, Journalism – Media Music, published in the**

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The name of Asst. Prof. Ventsislav Dimov, DSc, is well-known to people initiated in the academic and cultural activities, related, on the one hand, to the popular and traditional music, and on the other hand – to the media and the musical practices in them. A scientific researcher, university lecturer and media promotor of a number of musical practices, Asst. Prof. Dimov is the author of a large number of scientific works, frequently cited in the Bulgarian and international scientific literature. He is also known for being a member of the juries at festivals and competitions. In the current competition for Professor, he participates with 23 works – one monograph and 22 studies, articles and teaching manuals which are completely sufficient according to the requirements of the law and the regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. I will start with the monograph in my reference letter.

In this work by Asst. Prof. Ventsislav Dimov, DSc, there is a lot of many things – a multiple subject and object of investigation, a multitude of approaches in an ensemble, a lot of traced and analyzed empirical data, as well as many metaphors. They are already in the title of the work – “**music for the people**”, which, on the one hand, should be understood as folklore and popular music, produced and distributed by electronic media, mainly the radio, and on the other hand – “**soft power**” during socialism in Bulgaria, which should be understood as power which originates from the popular culture, which takes into consideration and depends on its reception by the audience and which acts through forms of entertainment, personal life and everyday life. If these two metaphors were not in the title, which lately have strongly attracted the attention of the author, we would simply say that the voluminous work is dedicated to the revealing of one of the basic sound pictures of the socialist past and the media, which produced and distributed it, as well as to the audiences which consumed it. However, such a formulation would deprive the author’s attitude to the subject of its “passionarity” (if we use the term of Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov). It is namely through the emphasis on the **soft power** via the musical media popular culture that Dimov joins the affirmation of theoretician Joseph Nye that “in conditions of continuous media revolution, *soft power* will become

increasingly more significant.” It is realized through something rather difficult to achieve – through stimulation of the people to have the expected from them behavior. Something, which the new socialist power as early as the 40s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, needed more than anything else.

In the **first** chapter, dedicated to the theoretical and terminological bases of the research, Dimov elaborates on the clarification of the basic notions and phenomena of *power* and *media* in the system of socialism, as well as on the basic working notions of *music for the people* and *soft power*. Some specific formulations are discussed, for example “hold the power with a song” or that the very music for the people is a media. The opposition is that the media – following a certain ideology – exercises “hard power” through the high arts and “soft power” through popular music. It is exactly here that the author applies a basic device in the deliberation and the writing of the text: the introduction of a definite personality to a certain problem, who by their deeds personifies and gives compactness to the affirmation. In the case here, it is the life work of composer Toncho Rusev, not only as an author, but also as an authority, recognized as such simultaneously by the people at “the top and the bottom”. Special attention is paid to the approaches, which the author uses in the construction of the multi-componential interpretation of the series **ideology – power – media – music – media workers – audience**. They are basically a culturological and anthropological approach plus the addition of historico-cultural and historico-anthropological approaches. That means that in general, the approach is interpretive, but also verifying. When presenting the approaches, which always occurs on the basis of an interpreted example, the author at all times integrates the reasoning of a large number of other authors as well, who, viewed as a sum, comprise one truly impressive bibliography. Particular attention in a certain paragraph is paid to two basic musico-cultural phenomena, which provide the so-called “music for the people”, and determine the “soft power” of the media during the period in question – unlike the hard power, which in the field treated here is avoided. These two phenomena are the **popular** and the **folklore**, taken as substantiated adjectives in their mutual determination. Here the author’s reasoning is of primary importance since the sphere of the popular is still debatable, especially when it concerns the period of socialism. This is not a new area for Dimov – on the contrary, he is one of the authorities in Bulgaria, who have determined that in the modern contexts the folklore becomes the people’s one, playing the role of a symbol of the Bulgarian and the national.

Dedicating the **second** chapter to the task of outlining the *music for the people* in the narrative of the party power, the author logically begins with texts, which mark this narrative: documents, resolutions, decisions, letters of the congresses of the Bulgarian Communist Party, plenums of the Central Committee and of the Politburo, the departments of “Propaganda and Agitation”, of the party organizations of the unions of cultural workers and media institutions. And since

the book by Dimov does not appear on a blank field, but is part of a series of works which study the socialist power and society, the author first refers in this chapter to thoughts and definitions of this kind by researchers in order to determine the type of totalitarian power and its attitude to the arts as an important part of the “great march to tomorrow’s day”. Thus, the second chapter is dedicated to a series of texts about the cultural revolution, about the socialist realism, about the heroes and heroism of the time, about the features of the new person and – especially important for us – about the increasing role of the media. This is traced in detail and in-depth during all the five decades of socialism in Bulgaria. There are definitions of the concepts of nationality and the party spirit of the arts, of the cultural elation of the people, of the amateur art activities, which reaches a scale, defining Bulgaria as a “republic of amateur art activities”, of competitions and – of course – of the Soviet example in all these areas. Here, I see a definite contribution in the circumstance that this work, for the first time in our humanity studies, reveals in detail the process of gaining control over the radio and its musical programs as early as 1944 – i.e. still in the early period of the Father Land Bulgaria 1944 – 1947, as well as in the period of “classical Stalinism” 1947 – 1952. And – logically – the chapter describes in detail the conceptions of the Party about *the music for the people* on the radio, namely the genres of folklore music, mass song and specially about the national anthem, about the arguable in this period estrada, and reveals the principles of what the contemporary power defined as *correct music*. Furthermore, it also reveals that similar to the Soviet Decree for Music “1948 Chaos instead of Music” – in Bulgaria as well since in 1952 the Bulgarian Communist Party issued a Decree of the Central Committee for the development of music, of the musical achievement and the intonation environment.

Central and most voluminous (130 pages) is the **third** chapter of the work, called “The Background. The Practice of the Mediators”. If we assume that the real subject of the work is nonetheless the practice of production and distribution of folklore music and partially the popular music in the media in the years of socialism in Bulgaria, then we can consider this chapter to be the main one. Its text begins with a series of “translations”, as the author defines them – translations by the leading communist ideology of the *music for the people* in the discourse of the creative and media mediators: composers, orchestrators, researchers, radio editors, producers and others. The data of these “translations” are always first-hand: for many years, Dimov has thoroughly studied archives, scenarios of programs, records of editors’ offices, materials in the specialized scientific literature and the mass press, as well as the recording fund of the Bulgarian National Radio, in order to closely acquaint us with a huge in scale practice, which – unlike many other practices during the time of socialism – cannot be defined only as forceful or incorrect, or having low results. These are things which we have come across in many research works in different spheres of the social life in Bulgaria during these 45 years, as for example the studies of

the management in the cultural sphere and everyday life during the time of socialism by Prof. Ivan Elenkov. My affirmation of constructiveness here refers, of course, above all, to the sphere of the media distribution of folklore music, while the state of the musical estrada is much more controversial and at certain moments even tragic, as it is in the sphere of the newly-created Bulgarian aesthetic music, treated plastically in the new work by Prof. Angelina Petrova “Ideological Discussions of the New Music /1944 – 1968/”. I have to explain that the five decades of socialism in Bulgaria, as far as the mass genres and the educationally treated musical art are concerned, are decades, especially the first three, of active cultural building, whose resultative institutional and employment infrastructure is used by our society today as well. Here, a peculiar aspect is the constant supervision of the professional growth of the cadres, who were expected to be at a high level even when it concerned amateur activities. The text consistently views the numerous practices in the sphere of folklore music – the musical radio-ensembles, folklore singers, the new people’s songs (about partisans, brigades, the new village). Again, as in the previous chapters, the author refers to biographical narrations (for example by Gyurga Pindzhurova and Atanaska Todorova), which gives flesh and authenticity to the description and analysis of the processes. Special emphasis was put on the practice of the satirical radio programs (those of the comic-songs singer Stoyan Milenkov or the duo “Miladin and Kostadin”), the important spheres of the minority folklore music was highlighted in the media (radio and gramophone records), the editorial institution in the radio, and partially in the Bulgarian Television. I believe that the whole of this chapter is a significant contribution to the media research in Bulgaria. It offers a huge authentic material together with its capacity of debating in a way, which will certainly turn the book by Ventsislav Dimov into a student’s handbook, besides its being a first-class culturalogical and anthropological work on an insufficiently known part of the Bulgarian musical and media-cultural reality of the recent past.

And, as in a successful sonata-symphonic cycle, the book finishes with the **fourth** part. It is titled “From the Bottom Upwards” and is dedicated to “the voices of the people”. This means the voice of the third participant in the process, where the perception of the *music for the people* occurred. Due to its *soft power*, the folklore music had successfully reached its addressee. The media had done their job, and, in the words of Prof. Ivan Stefanov, one of their basic functions were accomplished: “the reconciliation of Art and Entertainment”. As a gesture of reverence to the initial idea of the work, which has remained unaccomplished yet due to its hindering large scale, the chapter adds in the form of “a swarm of the entertainments” – jazz, the new youth dances of the pop music, as well as the practice in the television. The chapter finishes with an extensive presentation of an indicative case of the cultural practice in question about an active worker and creator of media productions and programs of folklore music, who described his life. The author insists on the significance of

such an end because in this way not only the village-square collective experiences of the *music for the people* are lit up, but also the intimate spaces of the participants in the process. Discussed separately, they confirm “the soft power” of the media-distributed folklore and popular music during socialism. The text ends with 20 pages of bibliography.

The reviewed monography, which has just been released, is a representative part of the collective project “The Soft Power of Popular Music in Media (by examples from Bulgaria and the Balkans)”, financed by the National Fund “Scientific Research”. In addition to it, Asst. Prof. Ventsislav Dimov DSc participates in the competition for Professor with yet another 22 works of his own /studies, articles, teaching manuals/ - part of his voluminous research creative work. As expected, the larger part of these 22 works are always in the field of the central theme, which Dimov has been developing for years, namely **the media music**, in which he is a path-maker in the sense of its thoroughness, I would say even totality of its research in our humanities. Here, we should put in the first place the program study “Toward the Understanding of Media Music” of 2018, in which, besides the necessity of studying the subject, emphasis is put on the interdisciplinary nature of the required methodology, combining sociological, culturological, anthropological, ethnographic and media research. At the basis of this path-making by Dimov in the study of media music, there exists enormous investigative and research work in sound and documentary archives, collections and other primary and secondary sources. The next publications by Dimov demonstrate the large scale of this terrain, which viewed in Dimov’s range, is longer than a century. Such is the article in English “On some Early Evidence of Musical Hybridization. Observations on Commercial Gramophone Recordings from Bulgaria”. Dimov presented this text at the Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music, held in 2006 in Varna, with his active participation in the organization of the event. Presenting Dimov’s research profile in the following works for the competition, I must say that besides the media music, there is yet another field where he is a path-maker in the Bulgarian humanities. This field is already connected not only with the media studies, but also with ethnomusicology and ethnography and partially with the Bulgarian historiography. It concerns two sub-profiles which additionally specify the image of the scientist – first, it is the connection with the Balkans, and second, the hybridization of our musical culture and the related to them musical phenomena *ethnopop* music and *ethnofusion*. In this respect, it is plausible to define as contributive the published in a respectable international edition article on the theme of “Slavonic Traces in the Recorded on Gramophone Records Music in Bulgaria”, reflecting on the work of Czechs, Russians, Serbs and other Slavic groups in the Bulgarian media music. The early sound-recording practice is discussed in the publication “Balkan Pubs and Cafes and the Birth of Local Recording Music”, printed in a publication of the Institute of Balkan Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. It demonstrates

Dimov's interests in the study of the city musical culture in Bulgaria and the Balkans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The next two publications on the theme of "media music" reveal the multi-sidedness of Dimov, both as a polemist and theoretician. In the article "Reverse Gaze: Art Reads the Academy", the author pays attention to the "ethnologization" of the documentary cinema in Bulgaria (films by Adela Peeva and Anri Kulev), which is not always sufficiently proper when declaring one's scientific sources. However, Dimov demonstrates his exceptional theoretical erudition in the study "On some Topical Uses of Music in the Media (the media Wagner: deconstructive decays or new syntheses)", where in relation to the first entire presentation of Wagner's tetralogy "Der Ring des Nibelungen" in Bulgaria, the result of "the misuse of Wagner" in the different media in the postmodern time is interpreted.

As an author of the first in Bulgaria scientific study of ethnopop music as a cultural and media industry, Asst. Prof. Dimov is especially active in the research and description of topical or on the other hand, traditional phenomena and processes in this sphere. In this thematic section of works, participating in the competition, there are five articles, each of them treating sensitive or controversial subjects of the ethnopop and ethnofusion. These are the publications "On some Orientalisms of Bulgarian Recorded Music" of 2005, "Around the Balkan Passions of the Ethnofusion" of 2008, "For Chalga with Disgust and Love" of 2009, "Constructing through Singing: of a Balkan Music Festival" of 2013, "On some Media Metamorphoses /how chalga stars become "leaders of civil causes" of 2019. These are articles in which the political negative "Balkanism" (M. Todorova) is opposed by a positive "musical Balkanism" or topical issues are treated, such as the political career of Slavi Trifonov, for example. The last, third group of studies and articles, with which Dimov participates in the competition, comprises works which oscillate in the thematic sphere of the presented at the beginning of the reference letter monograph. This is the theme "Music, Media, Power, Politics: the Soft Power of the Media Music". As the author himself specifies, the authoritative and political use of the media is a research challenge to him, which has motivated and defined the directions of his scientific search for the last few years. Here, firstly he positions the study "What a Memory It has Become. The song memorials for the war in Dobrudzha from 100 years ago", and after that the study "Bulgarian Hip-Hop Music as a Phenomenon of Alternative Journalism", published in Russian and English in a scientific edition of the Kazan Federal University, where hip-hop in Bulgaria is treated as a "song newspaper" and "new media". Then, the theme of the soft power and the people's and popular music, which is basically treated in the monograph, is put forward in the article "Power and Music for the People in Socialist Bulgaria", published in an edition with a high impact factor /Web of Science/. Its continuation is the study "Our Labor is the Song" /the people's music in the Bulgarian radio programs of the first years of socialism and its "soft power"/, where he treats the basic power-related

conceptions and practices through music in the Bulgarian radio programs during the first years of socialism in Bulgaria.

Examining critically the total activity of Ventsislav Dimov in the academically scientific, educational and administrative practices, it is difficult for me to see a field where he is not active or has not achieved excellent results. He is not only a theoretician, but also a worker of the media – for many years he has been a presenter on one of the national radios in Bulgaria. Dimov is especially productive in the sphere of education for the secondary schools. On the list of his works for the current competition, we see in the last but one position that he is a co-author of three textbooks in music and three teacher's manuals for the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades of the comprehensive schools. Paying substantiating tribute to the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Sciences, with which I would otherwise argue, Dimov is especially active in opening and directing the music educational process to the modern technologies and the new media. However, most probably, the most impressive is what the candidate did and which is presented in the last publication on the list of the works. This is his participation in a collective work on the Bulgarian folklore music “Sound Portraits from Bulgaria: a Journey to a Vanished World”, which is published by none other than the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, a world-famous institution with museum and other cultural functions. This is a work, in which Dimov is a co-author with most eminent American researchers of the Bulgarian traditional music, Martha Forsyth /one almost mythical name!/, Professors Donna Buchanan and Timothy Rice. This is already true recognition for Asst. Professor Dimov, Dsc as an internationally respected expert in ethnomusicology and other disciplines in the humanities, such as the media studies.

As a **conclusion** of my reference letter, I would like to declare that I assess the works, with which Asst. Prof. Dimov, DSc, participates in the current competition for Professor, as highly contributive and original, and that he meets all the criteria of the position for which he is a candidate. I would also like to add that I will give a positive vote for his candidature, calling on my colleagues in the competition jury to do the same.

**Sofia, 19 November 2019**

**Prof. Rosemary Statelova,  
PhD in Arts Studies**